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Argentina

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PARTICIPANTS: Colonel (Ret.) Vicente San Roman, Assistant Secretary for Internal Security, Ministry of Interior  
William H. Hallman, Political Counselor, American Embassy, Buenos Aires

DATE & PLACE: July 30, 1979; American Club, Buenos Aires

SUBJECT : Human Rights Problems

The Resistencia Rearrests. I asked about the six or seven persons who were reported rearrested after being released from prison in La Plata during June under a "dropped from PEN list." Colonel San Roman said that the number was wrong: There were 27 persons in this category, 25 of whom have been rounded up in one place or another in the Republic plus two who have thus far succeeded in eluding military authorities. San Roman said that this was purely a bureaucratic snafu. He said that when the Commission on prisoners met during June to consider names to be removed from PEN its members decided to delete the 27 names on grounds that they were of persons already charged and slated for trial by military court (consejo de guerra) in Resistencia. However the military authorities in Resistencia had not formally lodged this fact with the La Plata Penitentiary authorities -- so the 27 were simply let go, then had to be rounded up again.

The "DAM's". I asked whether this meant, then, that the 27 would be put at the "disposicion de autoridades militares". San Roman said that this category no longer exists. Persons who might formally have been considered as "DAM" prisoners are now listed as awaiting trial by a military court -- "consejo de guerra," he said.

Safety of the Resistencia Prisoners. I told San Roman of my recollection that people who in the past had been released from prison -- especially in La Plata -- who had not, apparently, "met all requirements" for a proper release by all persons interested in their case had turned up dead after a few days. (San Roman is an approachable person who seems able to cope with -- even enjoy -- frank talk.) He did not offer a direct reply but began to recall May 25, 1973, when by order of President Campora, inaugurated that day, Argentina's prisoners were all freed -- including many who stood convicted of terrorism. "We in the military stood and watched those people let go, parading through the streets and berating us and insulting us while we stood at attention during the ceremonies of that day. It is not the kind of thing that can be forgotten. Anyone who might have had some

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connection with that time of our history was unlikely to be forgiven by anyone having to do with the military."

Secret Detention Centers and Prisoners Liquidation. I told Colonel San Roman that I had heard a rumor in Buenos Aires to the effect that people in Rio Gallegos had found bodies washed up on the beach there. I admitted that the story was fourth hand and not necessarily reliable. Impossible," said San Roman, simply impossible. "Perhaps if you were talking about the period 1976 or 1977 there could be something to this kind of report, but these days -- no never." I asked whether there was a possibility that another service -- not the Army might have been involved in disposing of prisoners, and its activities not known to Colonel Roman. He shook his head, but then shrugged. (Comment: I had the feeling San Roman was indeed convinced that another service could not have been up to something so flagrant without his knowing, but that he lacked a means fully of assuring himself of this.)

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So what about the secret detention centers I asked. I cited one place which has been widely discussed here as a detention-interrogation facility, and which is known to have been subsequently destroyed as part of a city road building project. Secret detention centers do not exist, San Roman said. I asked what, then, had happened to persons who had disappeared, into the "system" and whether what he said was intended to mean that all of those persons are dead.

Once again San Roman did not meet my question head on but reflected "many people save themselves -- many people." They did this, he indicated, by telling what they knew about the terrorist movement. I confessed to Colonel San Roman that from what I had been told of interrogation methods I could imagine myself very quickly telling all that I knew of any subversive activities and anything else that came to mind. Yes, he said, this is the response of most people. But what would I imagine, he inquired, of the kind of young man who had delivered his uncle -- an Admiral in the Navy and reportedly very close to the young man throughout his life -- to a group of armed terrorists? What would I imagine of the mentality of the young woman who had worked for months to acquire a friendly access to the home of a police chief (by using the policeman's daughter) so that she could plant a bomb in his house? That was not the kind of person, San Roman said, who could be expected easily (or ever) to give up her secrets.

I asked, then, how long it had been generally expected that someone would remain "within the system." San Roman responded -- as he did several times during our conversation -- with a kind of verbal feint: Of course, he said, we are talking about theories and ideas. "I am not saying that there was a 'system,' or that people disappeared into it." Many people, he went on to say

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were able to last a long time.

The May 12 Disappearances. I asked San Roman if there was a clear indication that the six people picked up on May 12 were already dead. San Roman went on to imply that the May 12th abductions (the Jorge Sznajder case, reported Buenos Aires 4082) was an "unintended" event. You know, he said, that there are people who get terribly worked into doing "those kinds of things". Since January there have been no properly sponsored activities --- this was just one that somehow got away. (San Roman went on to digress about U.S. Army discipline in Vietnam he said he had seen described.)

Particular Cases. I mentioned to Colonel San Roman that I had recently been seeing individual human rights family cases because we are shorthanded in the Political Section and our interview officer was transferred. I mentioned specifically the three most recent interviews that I had: with the mother of Teresa Israel; with the father of Alfredo Antonio Giorgi, and with the mother of Alberto Jorge Tornay-Nigro. I told San Roman that there were many cases we had described to us that were compelling, but that these just had happened to have fallen to me and my own personal involvement in the last few days. San Roman did not offer help with the Israel case. He knows Mrs. Israel well. (That small, bird-like lady is a spirited lifelong member of the Argentine Communist Party. Mrs. Israel is also the mother of six children, is extremely proud of her old-Argentine family origins, and is a biology teacher at two private Catholic schools. San Roman said he could not understand her patriotism when she should know that were her political preferences to govern Argentina this would result in this country's being influenced by a foreign power and it very likely would mean the end of Mrs. Israel's comfortable, middle-class life style.) San Roman did, however, offer to get back in touch with me regarding the Giorgi and Tornay cases.

(COMMENT: San Roman telephoned the following day and said that he had no news on either case. He pointed out however that Tornay had disappeared in September of 1978 and that Giorgi had been abducted from his place of work in November. He seemed to be signalling that the cases were related, although he did not say this over the telephone. We know that Giorgi's father believes that his son was taken by the Navy and is still being held at the Navy Mechanics School. San Roman probably knows this also, and expected that I would come to the indicated conclusion. What was interesting about San Roman's offer was the incongruity of his suggesting that no persons who have been disappeared are still alive and his willingness to try to discover for me whether in fact two persons abducted during 1978 indeed might be alive.)

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Rehabilitation. I asked San Roman what had been the fate of certain people who apparently had "turned" and were being rehabilitated at secret locations. At first San Roman attempted to beg off on this -- he knew of no such places, he said -- until I reminded him that in, I believe, late 1977, a few journalists had actually been taken by government helicopter to visit these places. San Roman professed to believe that all of the former inmates had been "put back into society". When I mentioned rumors we heard of certain of these inmates having been in touch with their families but then having lost contact, San Roman brushed this off as possibly someone's cruel hoax in order to obtain money.

"Denuncias" at the Ministry of Interior. San Roman told me that there had been 43 formal denunciations received thus far in 1979 for missing persons. (COMMENT: This exceeds the number of disappearances the Embassy had reported to it -- which altogether number 25.) San Roman went on to admit that there had been "some 500" such denunciations in 1978, and roughly 2,000 during 1977 and 2,000 during 1976.

The Harguindeguy Statistics. I complained to Colonel San Roman that the format in which the Minister of Interior had issued his PEN and prisoner statistics on June 29 made them difficult to analyze. The Colonel -- whose smiling response at that point made it look as though he was either author of the figures or a leading participant in their preparation -- told me he would be pleased to answer any questions the Embassy might still have. (COMMENT: I have sent the same list of nine questions which we gave to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ambassador handed to General Viola.)

Right of Option. San Roman was still smarting from the July 4 Buenos Aires Herald assertion that Embassy officials are unhappy with Argentine processing in sending people to the United States under the Right of Option. He said that we should realize that many prisoners asked for certificates for Right of Option from several countries, and that simply because we issue a certificate does not mean that it is in fact presented by a prisoner -- who might well prefer to use his certificate from Israel or some other country. San Roman went on to say that "special screening" was given to persons who sought Right of Option for the United States, so that our system would not be burdened by people whose record of terrorism or subversion would disqualify them from being settled in the United States. Colonel San Roman claimed that this same treatment was given the Embassy of Canada and the Embassy of Belgium.

Assertions of Brutality and Misuse of Office. I told Colonel San Roman that in one case we had studied, brought to us by a family member, security officials who abducted a young man had

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gone back to his apartment several days later and cleaned it completely of furniture, electrical equipment, etc. They also stole his car. Then they went to two financial institutions where the person abducted had recently put money he had received from selling an apartment and, through a ruse, managed to take out all the money. San Roman asked if I were aware that more than 200 policemen had either been tried or were already serving sentences for misuse of authority and for brutal treatment of prisoners. I asked how many people in the Army were under process or condemned, since from what we could learn of the situation it seemed it was they who were in charge of removing people from their houses. San Roman looked ruffled by this (the only time during the conversation) but went on to reply "about 70, I think."

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